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XII.—THE STAGE HISTORY OF COLLEY CIBBER'S *THE CARELESS HUSBAND*

Theatrical records tend to prove that *The Careless Husband*, doubtless the best of Cibber's comedies, enjoyed a warm reception when it was first presented before London audiences. Produced for the first time at Drury-Lane on Thursday, December 7, 1704, it held the boards of that theatre for nightly performances during the remainder of that week, and, with the customary exception of Sunday, during the whole of the following week, which ended Saturday, December 16. The initial cast was: Sir Charles Easy — Wilks; Lord Foppington — Cibber; Lord Morelove — Powell; Lady Betty Modish — Mrs. Oldfield; Lady Easy — Mrs. Knight; Lady Graveairs — Mrs. Moore; Edging — Mrs. Lucas. Along with the announcement for Friday, December 15, there appears the following: "With a piece of Instrumental Musick to be performed by Mr. Paisible, Mr. Banister, and others. And several Entertainments of Dancing by Monsieur Cherrier, and others." For the next evening the managers promise a change in the bill: "Several Italian Sonata's on the Violin by Signior Gasparini. And several Entertainments of Dancing by Mrs. du Ruel." Such extradramatic features attend the production of the play rather frequently throughout its stage career.

In its subsequent history *The Careless Husband* had no other uninterrupted run as long as that immediately succeeding its première. Suspended on Saturday, December 16, it reappeared at Drury-Lane the following Thursday, December 21, embellished with "Italian Sonatas and Dancing." The winter holidays necessitating another break, the play again makes its appearance on Tuesday,

January 2, 1705. One week later, on January 9, the notice of the next performance adds, for the first time, the encouraging words: "At the Desire of Several Persons of Quality." After an eighteen-day withdrawal, the "Desire of Several Persons of Quality" again prevails, and *The Careless Husband* is restored on Saturday, January 27, this time with the sonorous proclamation that "the Famous Signiora Francisca Margaretta de l'Epine will Sing several Songs in Italian and English." An entire month passes, but managerial confidence in the popularity and drawing-power of the comedy is disclosed by the announcement which accompanies the notice for February 27: "For the Benefit of Mr. Wilks." No repetition occurs, however, until March 17 and June 2. The dull summer-season intervening, one finds no record of the play until the following October. During that autumn, however, and, indeed, during the rest of 1705, there are only two performances, one on October 13, the other on November 24, both Saturday evenings. In the spring of 1706 there are two productions, on February 19 and April 3; then comes an unprecedented gap of seven months, closing on November 7. On this date the play is transferred from Drury-Lane to the Queen's Theatre in the Haymarket, where it is acted by a troop advertised as "her Majesty's Company of Comedians," an organization differing somewhat in its personnel from the company formerly identified with the same play at Drury-Lane. The acting of Lord Morelove by Mills instead of Powell, of Lady Easy by Mrs. Barry instead of Mrs. Knight, of Lady Graveairs by Mrs. Porter instead of Mrs. Moore, and of Edging by Mrs. Signal instead of Mrs. Lucas, distinguishes the cast at the Haymarket from that at the other theatre; the advertisement, moreover, contains the

alluring words: "All the chief Parts being new drest, and play'd to the best Advantage."

This progressive change in policy apparently gave *The Careless Husband* a new lease of life. Repeated on November 12, five days after its debut on the new boards, it disappeared until November 22, 1706, when we find it not only restored, but signalized by a repetition on the succeeding night. The last performance for 1706 occurs on December 21.

In 1707 there were performances on February 11 and March 10, the latter for Cibber's benefit; but none thereafter until December 6 and December 30. The remainder of that theatrical season witnessed only one performance, on January 21, 1708, when the piece reappeared at Drury-Lane, its old home.

A review of these statistics shows sixteen performances of the play during its initial season, which extended from December 7, 1704, to the following July; four during the season of 1705-6; seven during that of 1706-7; and three during that of 1707-8.

After 1708, aside from an occasional renaissance of interest, *The Careless Husband* had only infrequent productions. An examination of newspaper files demonstrates that it was, in comparison with such plays as *Love for Love*, *The Beaux' Stratagem*, and *The Recruiting Officer*, indifferently popular at best. The seasons of 1708-9 and 1709-10 witnessed one performance each. Mrs. Knight had been restored to the rôle of Lady Easy; Edging was played by Mrs. Saunders, who displaced Mrs. Bignal. Mrs. Rogers, supplanting Mrs. Porter, played Lady Graveairs. A break of five years in the available documents makes it difficult to mention exact figures; but it is hardly conceivable that the performances averaged more than three or four annually, though there may have been spas-

modie revivals with long intervals between. Such a revival took place in March, 1715, when a performance at Lincoln's-Inn-Fields on the 17th was followed by another at the same theatre on the 19th, and by still another, at Drury-Lane, on the 30th. Even after paying this tribute of enthusiasm—for three performances within a fortnight of a play over ten years old surely offer proof of enthusiastic regard—the public was still unsatisfied, and less than two months later *The Careless Husband* was repeated for the benefit of Wilks. The following season (1715-6) saw four performances, with no interval of less than six weeks between any consecutive two; the next season there were only two, separated by a period of three months, the first “at the Desire of Several Ladies of Quality,” the second a Cibber benefit adorned with a “Pastoral Dance as it was performed in the Musical Masque of Myrtillo.”

From the beginning of the season of 1716-7 to the end of the season of 1725-6, Genest¹ accounts for one performance each season. For 1726-7 he furnishes no memoranda whatever affecting *The Careless Husband*. To each season within the period 1727-30 he assigns one production. Genest's records, however, are not complete, and my conjecture—for it has not a sufficiently definite basis to be called an inference—is that the number of performances each season during the period 1716-30 averaged about two.

In the course of the third, and through the earlier part of the fourth, decades of the century several notable changes occurred in the cast. On March 14, 1717, the parts were played as follows: Morelove—Mills; Foppington—Cibber; Sir Charles—Wilks; Lady Betty—Mrs. Oldfield; Lady Easy—Mrs. Porter; Lady Graveairs—

¹ John Genest, *Some Account of the English Stage from the Restoration in 1660 to 1830*. Bath, 1832.

Mrs. Saunders; Edging—Mrs. Bicknell. On March 5, 1733, Cibber, Wilks, and Mills still acted Foppington, Sir Charles, and Morelove respectively. All of the female rôles, however, were in new hands. Mrs. Oldfield had died in 1730, Mrs. Heron having taken her place; and Mrs. Booth, Mrs. Horton, and Miss Raftor filled the rôles of Lady Easy, Lady Graveairs, and Edging.

Genest's data include no record of *The Careless Husband* between April 4, 1730, and January 29, 1732, but the testimony of Genest is far from conclusive. In listing only three performances for the decade commencing January 1, 1732, and ending December 31, 1741, he is unquestionably inaccurate, ignoring, for instance, a performance on April 13, 1732. That the comedy, at that time, won higher esteem than Genest's findings would indicate appears from these significant words in the announcement: "By command of his Royal Highness." For the next decade (1742-52) Genest mentions only two performances. In connection with that of February 9, 1745, he supplies the information, "Not acted 5 years," though Adams, in his *Dictionary of the Drama*, makes clear reference to a performance in 1742. To the following decade (1752-62) Genest assigns two, to the next (1762-72) three, and to the following (1772-82) two. He accounts, also, for one in 1790. Scattered along the whole period of 1732-92 I have found unequivocal notices of eight performances wholly overlooked by Genest: those on April 29, 1734; March 17, 1757; April 26, 1759; May 24, 1759; January 2, 1760; October 14, 1760; April 1, 1761; and November 28, 1792. It seems reasonable to surmise that *The Careless Husband*, during the whole of the eighteenth century after Mrs. Oldfield's death, was never off the London stage for more than two or three successive seasons; that sometimes it made its appearance, as illustrated by the dates

just cited, two or three times in a single season; and, finally, that the number of performances probably averaged one, and possibly two, biennially.

There is evidence of two Scottish performances of the play, both in Edinburgh, the one on January 7, 1734, the other on February 11, 1764. That it aroused the animadversion, or at least the attention, of the public authorities is plain from a news-item in the *Caledonian Mercury* stating that on January 9, 1739, one John Morison was imprisoned for "presuming to put up placards [placards]" advertising "that at night the Comedy, called the Careless Husband" would be acted in Carraber's Close.

Even more meagre and unsatisfactory are the sources that bear upon the Irish productions. It is known, nevertheless, that in Dublin, during the brief summer-season of 1742, Peg Woffington assumed the rôle of Lady Betty, and that during the regular season of 1751-2 she acted the part there. It is not unlikely that she appeared in Dublin in the same capacity during the interval.

After William Hallam, the manager of Goodman's Fields, had gone into insolvency in 1750, he dispatched a company of players to America, thus introducing English drama, in its wider scope, to the western hemisphere. Among the twenty-four plays which were prepared before the departure from England was *The Careless Husband*, which, it may be presumed, had at least a few performances in the course of the American residence. Dunlap, it is true, in his *American Theatre*, includes Cibber's comedy among the plays the popularity of which did not survive into the next century; he intimates, however, that it had its following during the earlier years of the American enterprise.

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